

sarcophagus

*Beir*

{sahr-kahf'-uh-guhs}

A sarcophagus is an ancient coffin (chest and lid) made of wood, terra-cotta, marble, alabaster, or metal, and generally ornamented with painting, sculpture, or both. From the Hellenistic through the Early Christian period (4th century BC-5th century AD), sarcophagi were usually adorned with vividly colored, elaborately carved reliefs, or friezes, of either continuous scenes or rows of single figures in architectural settings. Sarcophagi are an invaluable record of sculptural style, technique, and subject matter, especially with regard to funerary sculpture. The term sarcophagus derives from two Greek words meaning "flesh-eating." According to the Roman historian Pliny the Elder, this stemmed from the use, during prehistoric ages as well as in ancient Egypt and Greece, of coffins lined with a type of stone with caustic properties that was believed to consume a corpse in 40 days. The oldest known sarcophagus is Egyptian and dates from the 1st dynasty (c.3000 BC). One of the best known Egyptian examples is the red-granite sarcophagus of Tutankhamen (c.1350 BC; Cairo Museum).

The "Greek type" of stone sarcophagus was decorated on all four sides. Found in eastern Hellenistic kingdoms, it dates from the mid-4th century BC and remained in use during Roman times. A fine example is the brightly painted Alexander Sarcophagus (late 4th century BC; Istanbul Museum).

In ancient Italy Etruscan sarcophagi were generally modeled in terra-cotta or carved in stone and date from the 6th to the 1st century BC. These were the first to portray on their lids the recumbent effigy of the deceased individual or, as on the di Vulci Sarcophagus (c.400-350 BC; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston), the effigies of a deceased couple.

The earliest Roman sarcophagus is that of Lucius Cornelius Scipio Barbatus (3d century BC; the Vatican, Rome). It is unusual in date because Romans preferred cremation to burial until AD c.100. The "Roman type" of sarcophagus was carved in high relief, often with representations of garlands, battles, and mythological subjects. A good example is the Niobid Sarcophagus (AD c.130; Lateran, Rome).

On Christian sarcophagi after AD 400, such as that of Saint Barbara in Ravenna (AD c.500), biblical themes replaced mythological and historical subjects. The continuous narrative of the Roman sarcophagi was supplanted by crowded, super-imposed scenes, or niches, separated by small columns, and enclosing figures.

The Early Christian column sarcophagus, derived from Greek versions exported to Rome from Asia Minor (AD 100-200), influenced medieval and Gothic funerary sculpture, for example Tino da Camaino's monument for Holy Roman Emperor Henry VII (c.1310; Campo Santo, Pisa). Because of their classical grandeur and dignity, ornate sarcophagi continued to be made during the Renaissance and Baroque periods and were sometimes incorporated in monumental tombs, for example, Andrea del Verrocchio's Medici Tomb (c.1472; San Lorenzo, Florence).

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